

Perspective on Religion and the Interpretation of Scripture

Recently the HT editorial staff decided to exclude from the Letters to the Editor those that focus primarily on the interpretation of particular scriptural verses. I concur that such letters are not appropriate for publication in a newspaper. The disputing parties ought to get together and argue things out among themselves.

I also concur that there is a place for letters that, in the course of addressing particular issues, invoke scriptural or religious authority. It's almost always helpful to know by what authority—whether science, religion, history, philosophy, social science, empirical data, personal experience, or whatever—support for a particular argument or point of view can be given.

Regarding the Bible, it is possible to make almost any case you want for almost any conclusion by a selective reading of texts. Biblical scholars call this proof-texting. It is not a valid means of understanding the biblical message as a whole, for it ignores both the larger context of particular verses and the over-arching meaning of the entire collection of texts that comprise the Bible. The same, of course, can be said for the interpretation of most other scriptural texts.

The art of interpreting any significant text is an on-going challenge. In religion it can be an especially critical challenge, because so much is often thought to hang on the outcome. Is war permissible or not? -abortion? -taxation? -gay marriage? -capital punishment? -use of force or violence? -private property? What is the proper role of the state? -of religious institutions? -of laws and government? -of political leaders?

Then, for Christians at least, there is the question of what is meant by salvation, and what are its prerequisites. Personally, I believe Christians have expended far too much time and energy trying to answer this question in individual terms. Christians should be concerned about whether they are being faithful to God and God's purposes, not about what's going to happen to them in the hereafter.

Within every major religious tradition there are multiple expressions based on differing cultural contexts, histories, interpretations, and practices. From my perspective, some versions of Christianity seem much closer to the mark than others. Some versions, like the recently exposed Hutaree militia, seem far beyond the pale. And I have yet to find any version that is without significant failing! If God is not gracious we are all in for a heap of trouble. Meanwhile, be kind to one another.

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